



MY DAY AS A
VOLUNTEER

A HANDS-ON LOOK AT THE JOBS
AND PEOPLE WHO MAKE
AIRVENTURE POSSIBLE

BY LANE WALLACE



Lane guides a Cessna into a parking spot in the North 40 camping area. On opening weekend, there can be as many as 80 volunteers at a time parking airplanes there.



IN HER NOVEL *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee wrote (through the voice of Atticus Finch, the father in the story), “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

It’s a true and sage piece of wisdom. It’s also how I found myself huddled under the wing of a Cessna Cardinal in the North 40 airplane camping area at Oshkosh, sneakers and socks already soaked by a pouring rainstorm, getting ready to plunge out into the storm for the team, and the cause.

Every year, EAA lauds the volunteers—more than 5,000 of them—who make AirVenture run. “They” are the backbone of the event—and, to be honest, EAA itself. Any EAA member knows that. But in truth, while I certainly have always appreciated the effort of all those volunteers, I never really understood why someone would sign up for one of those jobs. If I’m going to an air show, I can’t quite see myself wanting to spend five or six hours, every day of my time there, making 1,400

sandwiches or bagging 2,800 cookies in individual packets. Just for one example.

But that’s Harper Lee’s point. If you want to understand, you have to put yourself in that person’s shoes. Or sneakers, as the case may be. So instead of just *writing* about the volunteers this year, I volunteered to actually *be* one, in as many areas as I could manage over a three-day period of time.

I parked airplanes in the North 40. I drove a tram. I *conducted* on a tram. I helped kids carve propellers out of wood blanks. I helped greet, direct, and register some of the almost 8,000 vehicles arriving at Camp Scholler. I spent time mentoring high school students for Women Soar at the EAA Seaplane Base and at the Women in Aviation breakfast the next morning. I worked on a radio interview with the volunteers at the EAA Radio station on-site. I sold tickets, memberships, and programs at the main admission gate. And yes, I hung out with women making sandwiches and bagging cookies—and then found myself *eating* those sandwiches and cookies, out in the field.

So. What did I glean from all of that time in a volunteer’s shoes? Many things.

For starters, a number of those volunteer jobs start well before AirVenture does. It’s reassuring, for example, that EAA requires all tram drivers and conductors to get *training* before taking all those visitors’ lives in their hands. And to be fair, it had been more than 30 years since I’d driven a tractor, and a lot about tractors has changed in that time. Especially with two articulated tram carriages in tow.

The training of new tram drivers falls to Roy Bickel, EAA 438027, a farmer and experienced tractor driver who first came to Oshkosh with his wife, Dakres, 17 years ago. They wanted to get involved, but they wanted something they could do together. And since Roy was already versed in tractor operations, they signed on as tram volunteers—Roy as a driver, and Dakres as a conductor. Apparently, volunteering with the trams is popular among couples, because it’s one of the areas where they can work together as a team.

The last tractor I drove was a stick shift, and it was pretty basic. The ones at Oshkosh are far more refined and complicated machines. In addition to automatic gears (and pneumatic seat controls), they have infinitely adjustable hydrostatic drives, controlled by both a hand throttle and a foot pedal. It sounded complex, so I thought I’d opt for the auto-throttle option, which handles the rpm for you. But on the road, the auto throttle felt as if it was making the rpm surge. So I ended up driving the tractor like an aircraft with manifold pressure and rpm controls (although a bit in reverse): set the rpm at 2200 when moving, and adjust the foot pedal as necessary to get 6 mph. When coming to a stop, reduce the rpm to idle.

The point is, operating one of those tractor trams is harder than it looks, and some farming or airplane background helps. And that’s without worrying about the tandem carriages in tow. Roy had me practice turns through rows of parked trams in the storage yard until he was sure I could turn without hitting anything or swinging the carriages wide. Understandably, swinging the carriages wide—especially if it brings passengers in contact with obstacles on the sides of the roads—is a career-limiting maneuver, in the tram volunteer world.



Lane gets a checkout on one of the EAA trams from trainer Roy Bickel.

So is getting lost. One might think that getting lost with a tram would be a laughable notion. Anyone who's been to the show more than once has a pretty good idea of where the trams run. But I'm told it's happened. So Gene and Sandy Zorn, the volunteer chairmen of the tram volunteers, were working hard to prevent repeat performances. Even after Roy signed me off, they had me ride along on the route before I drove a tram on my own, and they made sure I understood, like any VFR pilot, that it was my responsibility to see and avoid everything in my path. It sounds straightforward, but I'm here to tell you: the task gets exponentially harder during the air show, when people start wandering unpredictably and obliviously across the road, eyes only on the sky.

For my part, the better job in the tram world is that of a conductor. No lives at stake, no portable toilets or runaway toddlers to avoid. And...okay, I confess, it's really kind of *fun*. Some conductors don't say much to the passengers; just a basic announcement of the next stop. But others embrace the role of tour guide; they ask if there are newcomers on board, point out the sights, and joke and banter with the passengers. One conductor even played his trumpet, last year. For three minutes, in between stops, a street musician or stand-up comic has a captive audience, on the Oshkosh trams.

The other volunteer job that required serious pre-AirVenture training was ticket selling at the front gate. There's an entire training manual, and seven separate training videos, that all volunteers have to work through before sitting down for the onslaught on opening day. Like many of the volunteer jobs at the show, selling tickets doesn't *sound* hard. But it's deceptively difficult to get it really right—partly because of the multitude of options and problems you have to be ready to address, and partly because of the time pressure you're under to address it all correctly. After all, the line behind each customer is often very long, indeed.

Say a couple comes to the window and says they want to buy tickets. Are they EAA members? That's not only a separate price, but a separate computer screen. Is their membership up for renewal? Or do



Lane and her fellow aircraft operations volunteers high-five each other after successfully parking the Mooney mass arrival.



Lane and volunteer Amy Laboda tape an interview segment to air later in the week on EAA Radio. More than 30 volunteers, some from St. Cloud University and from the tech and media industries, create all the programming and keep EAA Radio operating 24/7 during AirVenture.



Lane sells tickets and memberships at the main admission gate at AirVenture.



Lane guides and greets some of the 8,000 vehicles that arrive at Camp Scholler each year.

they want to join EAA in order to save money on their admission? Does it make more sense for them to buy a weekly pass? Or several daily passes? A good volunteer can quickly calculate their savings and explain the options clearly, so the visitors can make a good decision. If they join EAA at the ticket counter, do they want to receive *Sport Aviation* in a print version? Or in a digital format? And do they want auto-renewal of their membership? How many guests do they have with them? Children between 6 and 18? All different keystrokes, and different pages, as well as different wristbands. And that's not even getting into the complications of international, foreign-language visitors.

Levi Wolff, who was working with me, had just returned to Wisconsin from a year teaching English in Spain. He was starting a new job right after AirVenture, and a friend had suggested he volunteer for the event during his time off...and suggested that he ask for a slot at the front gate, because of his bilingual ability.

"I've gotten to use my Spanish three times," he told me Tuesday morning, "and that felt really good."

I didn't get to use any foreign languages at the admissions building, but I will say this: helping people work through all the various details, options, and benefits, and doing it in a competent, efficient, and cheerful enough way that the enthusiasm on their faces didn't fade before they actually got in the gate...really *did* feel good. The same thing was true of the entrance ramp at Camp Scholler, where volunteers help greet and funnel a sometimes overwhelming number of RVs and cars through the bottleneck of camping registration as well as show admission.

Granted, there is an added element of...umm...*excitement* on the ramp, because the greeting and helping job also involves maneuvering in traffic, and counting on your two small, brightly colored wands to stop that 7-ton motor home bearing down on you. But really, the essential job is the same.

People arrive at Oshkosh, especially if they're coming for the very first time, with Christmas morning hopes and expectations. You can see it on their faces. And most of the volunteers I worked with got

that...and understood that their real job was to help keep that Christmas excitement alive all week long.

In truth, I think it's part of the appeal of volunteering. For most adults, particularly those still in the working world, a lot of their daily interactions with people involve some kind of stress or potential point of conflict. "Why is that proposal/project/task not finished?" "What do you *mean* the warranty doesn't cover that particular kind of problem?" "I don't care how important that party is. You aren't going if you don't get that college application finished first!" The list goes on and on. So spending a week saying "Welcome to Oshkosh!" with a big smile, with no agenda other than to help, and to keep a bunch of enthusiastic people safe and happy, can be a really wonderful change.

"To take vacation to do a job where the hours are longer and the pay is worse may seem silly to outsiders, but it makes perfect sense to us," laughed Tony Bomber (yes, that's his real last name), who's worked in the North 40, parking airplanes, for the past six years.

Like tram driving or ticket selling, parking aircraft doesn't sound all that difficult. After all, most pilots have been following ground handlers' signals for years. So most of the training for aircraft parking at Oshkosh is on the job. On the other hand, that 7-ton motor home at Camp Scholler has nothing on a fast-taxiing Bonanza with a spinning propeller heading directly toward you.

"Pilots landing at Oshkosh are often overwhelmed with all the people and aircraft going every which way, and they're still pretty amped from the arrival," Tony told me. "So the most important thing is to make sure your signals are *big*, and unmistakably clear. Make eye contact. Make sure they see you. Get those wands way up in the air. Make really big, decisive gestures."

The system is impressive. Volunteers stage all the way from the runway to the open parking spots. Each volunteer, equipped with orange paddles or wands, picks up each aircraft from the preceding volunteer, and then (with a decisive directional gesture) hands them off to the next parking volunteer along the line.

But as each aircraft taxied toward the volunteer at the end of the row, my heartbeat picked up a bit, knowing that in seconds, the



Lane helps to mentor (and feed) some of the 100 high school girls who attend Women Soar each year. The volunteers who mentor the girls are recruited from the top ranks of successful women across a wide variety of jobs in the aviation industry.

welfare of that plane, and all the others parked near it, would be in my hands. As the plane got ready to turn into the aisle, I shot my arms high above my head, so there'd be no mistaking who the pilot's next controller would be.

The trick, with aircraft parking, is timing. Timing when to signal them—not too soon, so they get confused, but not too late, so they get lost. And timing when to signal them to turn, and when to stop, knowing that a pilot might not respond instantly, and each plane has a different turning radius...and that each pilot and plane might brake differently, as well.

All of that matters particularly, because in order to fit as many aircraft into the parking areas as possible, volunteers alternate parking planes nose-in and tail-in. But the nose-in planes have to be positioned first. One person counts off the distance from one nose-in propeller to the next empty spot where a nose-in airplane should go (for me that was 17 long paces). They stand in that spot, along a line burned in the grass with weedkiller. A second volunteer stands in the middle of the taxi lane in between the rows

and determines when to signal the arriving airplane to turn so that the plane ends up lined up with that first volunteer, who then guides the aircraft into the spot, signaling the pilot to stop when the main gear is neatly aligned with that burned-out line.

Again, it's not rocket engineering, but it's still easy to get your timing off. Or steer an airplane catty-cornered into the spot, so there's no room to get another airplane in next to it. Or, god forbid, get one wingtip too close to another. And that's when the planes are coming in one at a time. The mass arrivals are where the job of aircraft parking becomes something akin to a championship team sport.

The day I volunteered in the aircraft parking area, the Mooney caravan was scheduled to arrive at 11 a.m. Unfortunately, just as the Mooneys were approaching the field, so was a huge, dark storm cell. As the Mooneys reported 10 miles to the south, inbound, the skies opened up. Some smart volunteers carried EAA rain ponchos in their pockets for just such an occasion, but most of us still took shelter under the wing



of a Cessna Cardinal—the sole high-wing aircraft in the area.

“So,” I asked the slightly drenched, crouched-over group of volunteers huddled with me, “is this still...*fun* for you all?” A slightly embarrassed chuckle went through the group.

“Sure!” one volunteer replied. “It’s not just a job, it’s an adventure!” added another. They took the opportunity of the break to pull out plastic bags with sandwiches and cookies and munch them while we waited for news on the Mooneys.

At the time, I thought they were all awfully organized, to have packed lunches before coming out to the show. “Cookie?” one of the volunteers asked me, holding out a little baggie with two cookies in it. Only later did I discover that those cookies and sandwiches were the work of yet *other* volunteers, who start work early each morning to get 1,400 sandwiches made, bagged, paired with side baggies of chips (114 cases, total), cookies (70 cases), and carrot/celery sticks (80 pounds of each), along with water, sodas, and homemade lemonade, and then distributed by truck to the volunteers in the field, four times a day.

“It’s not gourmet,” cautioned Barry Sherrill, EAA 337504, vice chairman of the sandwich-making contingent. But crouched under the dripping wing of a Cardinal, a long distance from any other food option, the sandwiches and cookies were welcome comfort, indeed.

As the rain continued, lighter but still insistent, one of the crouching volunteers finally asked, “Why, again, are we here?” as she gazed out at the drenched field. The answer arrived almost instantaneously.

“Incoming!” Tony called out from his position on top of a John Deere Gator. He pointed to the taxiway, where a long line of Mooneys was headed our way. We all sprinted out from our cover to our pre-assigned positions. I was a “stopper,” or the person who paced off each nose-in parking position and guided the planes to a stop. I no sooner had one airplane stopped, and signaled the pilot to cut the engine, than I was off, sprinting to where the second “stopper” on our team was, already parking the next plane. I then paced off where the next Mooney needed to go, and by the time I got there, I was generally taking the hand-off from other team volunteers who were gesturing broadly to get Mooneys to

turn, angle the other way for a tail-in spot, and chasing down a couple of confused pilots who were headed off in different directions.

The minutes went by in a blur. It wasn’t until the 35th Mooney pulled to a stop and cut its engine that we took a breath, looked around, and high-fived each other for getting all the planes parked without incident or disorder. And that was only 35 airplanes. I can’t imagine handling the Bonanza mass arrival, where more than 100 fast-moving Bonanzas descend on this same team at once.

That, in fact, is really the challenge of any of these volunteer positions. Doing any of it for a short period of time isn’t hard. But it’s when you contemplate handling an intense volume, whether it’s motor homes and cars into the camping area, people at the ticket booths, or airplanes in the North 40, for *hours on end*, that you understand the true value of volunteers willing to put in three-, four-, or five-hour shifts.

What balances that, according to every volunteer I talked to—including the women making the sandwiches—is the company they keep.

“It’s wonderful!” said Mary Schumacher, who was in the midst of her eighth or ninth year of making sandwiches for volunteers. “We chat, and laugh, and have a good time,” she said, gesturing with an elbow at her fellow sandwich makers, since she was still producing sandwiches as she talked. “And when we take the sandwiches out to the volunteers, they’re so glad to see us! It’s fun.”

“More important to me than even parking the airplanes,” Tony Bomber said, “is seeing the other volunteers every year. It’s like a reunion. I love getting the arriving pilots’ stories, but when you see volunteers you’ve known for years, you want to know how that surgery went. Or how their kids are doing. That’s what makes it worth doing every year.”

Having a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging and family are two of the biggest, basic needs humans have, of course. So perhaps the appeal of volunteering isn’t so terribly hard to understand, after all.

There are, however, some volunteer jobs that offer even more immediate rewards: the ones involving kids. For obvious reasons, the selection criteria for volunteers who will be in contact with kids are stricter than for other jobs. But also, mentoring implies the sharing of knowledge. So, for example, Debby



This small group of volunteers makes more than 13,000 sandwiches in the course of the week and takes them out four times a day, along with drinks and refreshments, to feed other volunteers working in the field.



Lane helps a child at KidVenture carve his own propeller out of a wood blank.

Rihn-Harvey, EAA 147103, who runs the Women Soar program, which brings around 100 high school girls to Oshkosh each year for four days of education, immersion, and inspiration, actively recruits female volunteers who are highly accomplished in education or aviation.

Over at KidVenture, I found all kinds of aerospace professionals among the volunteer corps. But that makes sense, because KidVenture now aims to teach kids real aircraft maintenance and piloting skills. It's hard to teach a kid to rivet if you have no clue how to do it, yourself.

Having said that, KidVenture Chairman Dan Majka, EAA Lifetime 90726, and a volunteer named Pat Gallahu, EAA 104147, recruited me to help kids carve wooden propellers out of blanks. I understand the *concept* of a propeller, and an airfoil, of course, and I've run my hand along the curved shape of my own plane's propeller in every preflight. But carving one proved harder than it looked. Pat had me carve my own first—in part so I'd learn what to tell the kids to do, and in part because I'd need that finished product to show the kids what they were aiming for.

Working with the kids, though, was fun. Nothing is quite so rewarding as helping a child learn a new skill and shine with the pride of accomplishment. And my goodness! The enthusiasm they give back to you can drown out a year's worth of adult stress and cynicism. I helped serve pizza to the girls in the Women Soar program at the Seaplane Base on Tuesday, and then sat and talked with a number of them during the Women in Aviation breakfast on Wednesday morning. I shared my winding-path story of how I'd gotten into aviation and writing, and I heard, in return, some of their own dreams, hopes, and aspirations. It was inspiring. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to have a lifetime and world's worth of possibilities still ahead and open to you.

The payoff, though, wasn't just getting a glimpse of the world through the young women's eyes. As it happened, we all got raffle tickets with our name tags. Despite the fact that I never win any of those kinds of things, I actually won one of the last raffle prizes.

LOOKING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

EAA is currently looking for a volunteer chairman to oversee Operation Thirst during AirVenture Oshkosh.

Operation Thirst is responsible for preparing almost 1,000 daily lunches and beverages to various volunteer areas of during convention. The individual will oversee a group of volunteers responsible for food prep, deliveries, and distribution of beverages. An individual familiar with large-volume food prep is preferred, but a willingness to learn and appreciation to serve the hard-working and dedicated EAA volunteers is all that is needed.

The individual will work closely with EAA's food and beverage manager.

If you are interested, please contact Janine Diana at jdiana@eaa.org.

“Oh! That's me!” I exclaimed as I got up to claim my prize. A huge cheer, punctuated by squeals and loud applause, erupted from the girls around me. Talk about a sense of belonging!

Seriously. I have a lot of friends. They don't ever cheer me on that loudly and enthusiastically. Do I wonder why all those accomplished women take time off and pay their own way to come work at Oshkosh for four days? Heck, no!

All of this is to say, after walking for a short time in the shoes of all those volunteers, I do, indeed, have a far greater understanding of why people do it. Once you've been to Oshkosh a few times, you've seen the sights and show. So volunteering offers something more. It offers a way to be involved and have a sense of purpose and accomplishment. You get to feel helpful and appreciated. You meet all kinds of new people. You form friendships, and get to renew those friendships, every year. And if you happen to work with kids, you get a vicarious transfusion of the high-octane energy, enthusiasm, and sense of excitement that only young people can muster.

Oh, yeah. And if you're really lucky (and responsible, skilled, and trained)...they might even let you drive the trams. *EAA*

Lane Wallace, EAA 650945, has been an aviation columnist, editor, and author for more than 20 years. More of her writing can be found at www.LaneWallace.com and at www.TheAtlantic.com/Lane-Wallace.